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The Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John

MARY ELLEN PEREIRA

Perhaps we learned as children to be wary of certain gifts. The most intriguing package would be declined when offered by a bully who tormented us on the playground or the annoying friend who loved to trick us with practical jokes. Even the well-intentioned presents from relatives could evoke an inward grimace as we expressed our insincere appreciation for items that were outdated or ugly in our eyes.

Other gifts, however, were treasured beyond any face value, especially when given as a symbol of love and a reminder of abiding relationship. These were special gifts that reminded us of the giver even during periods of lengthy absence. They generated a sense of closeness and comfort; at the same time they reminded us of the character of our beloved. Unlike the presents given by others, a gift from the beloved was cherished and enjoyed endlessly.

Certainly Jesus intended the gift of the Holy Spirit to be such a gift for believers. Yet, we often regard the Holy Spirit with the same skepticism we might give to a package offered by one whose motives we have learned to question. Although we have no doubt about Christ's deep, self-sacrificing love for us, we still approach his gift with hesitation. A closer look at the Holy Spirit through the eyes of the apostle John, however, can help us realize several details about this precious gift.

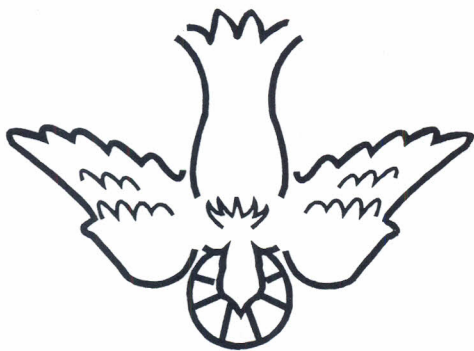
JESUS GIVES US THE SAME SPIRIT THAT WAS WITH HIM ON EARTH

The Holy Spirit was intimately involved with Jesus during his earthly ministry. At the time of Jesus' baptism by John, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven and rested on him. The gospel writer makes it clear that it was this particular sign that identified Jesus as the Son of God, come to take away the sin of the world (1:29, 34).

But the role of the Holy Spirit extended far beyond that of simply identifying Jesus as the expected Messiah; the Spirit also *remained* with him (1:32). This becomes especially significant as we note that it was the Spirit that empowered the message of Jesus (3:32-34). Just as God sent Jesus to proclaim the message

of salvation, God also sent the fullness of the Spirit to empower the proclamation of Jesus, even in the midst of people who would reject his message.

Prophets foretold that an abundant measure of the Spirit would be evident in the Messiah when he came. They noted that both the mission and message of God's anointed one would be marked by God's Spirit (e.g., Isa 42:1, 61:1). Other Gospel writers record that Jesus himself acknowledged that his commission to ministry was not by means of any human application of oil, but by direct anoint-



ing with the Spirit of the Lord (Matt 12:18; Luke 4:18-21). It was this Spirit that undergirded Christ's work of justice and mercy.

The very Spirit that participated in the ministry of Jesus is the same Holy Spirit that participates in the lives of Christians today. Rather than reacting with unwarranted skepticism concerning the character of the Spirit, we can realize that the Holy Spirit was a welcome presence involved in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. Here is one who intimately knew the work and passion of our Lord.

THE SPIRIT IS SENT FROM GOD AT JESUS' REQUEST

Believers cherish the reminder in John 3:16 that God loved us so deeply that he sent his Son, Jesus, to us. We don't avoid this divine gift, wondering whether we really want to receive its fullness. Instead, we accept Jesus as our Redeemer and Lord, a beloved gift for God's beloved. We are often more wary, however, about the Holy Spirit, a gift that was provided for us at the special request of Jesus himself.

In the last hours before Jesus' crucifixion, he tried to prepare the disciples for the impending difficulties. Concerned about their coming grief at his departure, Jesus spoke words of encouragement, telling of the special arrangements he was going to make on their behalf. After promising that he would prepare a place in his Father's home where they could be together again, he spoke of another, more immediate gift that he would provide for the believers.

Jesus disclosed that he would ask the Father to give them another Advocate in his place (14:16; cf. 1 John 2:1). The united efforts of both the Father and the Son in providing this new Advocate are apparent. At Jesus' request, the Holy Spirit would be sent as a gift from the Father in the name of the Son (14:16, 26). Although the Spirit is sent from the Father, it is clear that Jesus remains directly involved in both *requesting* and *sending* the Holy Spirit (15:26; 16:7). It is difficult to distinguish between the actions of the Father and the Son in this matter. The gift of the Advocate is obviously a joint effort, accomplished in complete unity of will and action by both the Father and the Son.

This is not the first time a precious gift was sent in the divine name. Jesus himself was sent in God's name (5:43). He accomplished his ministry of redemption in the Father's name (10:25). Then, as he prepared to complete his work and return to the Father, Jesus arranged two more provisions for those who would remain on earth. He requested that the power of the name of the Father would protect his followers (17:11). And he disclosed that he would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit as an Advocate after his departure (14:26). Like other work done on our behalf, this gift of the Holy Spirit can be welcomed as Christ's loving provision for believers.

THE SPIRIT IS GIVEN SO WE WILL NOT BE ORPHANED

When the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, he revealed the heart and glory of God (1:14, 18). During the few, short years of the incarnation, God was with us in finite time and space. Who among us has not wished that we could have been part of that band of disciples following the dusty footsteps of Jesus for those brief years? But the cross would come, bringing a death that would be broken by the resurrection. Redemption accomplished, Jesus would return to the side of God in order to intercede for us. But what of those left behind?

Jesus knew that the disciples did not understand his mission, although he had often discussed his coming death and ascension. Without his continuing tutelage, how could they comprehend the difficult truths that had eluded them in his presence? They would be like any other group of disciples orphaned at the death of their rabbi.

Knowing the difficulties ahead, Jesus promised that his believers would not be orphaned by his death (14:18). The Holy Spirit continued Jesus' work, guiding believers into truth and helping them to recall and apply the teachings of Jesus (14:26, 16:13). He does not speak on his own but faithfully proclaims the same message given to Jesus by the Father (16:13-15). Although Jesus, the incarnate Son, is not physically

with us, we are not left as orphans bereft of the presence of God. The same Spirit that remained with Jesus throughout his ministry remains with us (14:16-17) and continues to glorify the Lord.

When Jesus asked his Father to give the Spirit to his followers, he was providing an Advocate who would be with us forever (14:16). Jesus personally requested that the same Spirit who had dwelled with him would be given to his followers. We have assurance that we will come to know the Spirit because he will abide with us and actually be in us (14:17).

The gift of the Spirit was motivated by Jesus' concern that his followers not be orphaned at his ascension. This gift, however, goes beyond simply providing a presence in Jesus' absence. Jesus intended it to be an even more exquisite gift. With the coming of the Spirit, we begin to understand that just as Jesus is in the Father, we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us (14:20). Further, as we love Jesus and keep his word, the Father loves us (14:23). And, most incredibly, through the presence of the Spirit both the Father and the Son come and make their home with the believer (14:23)!

THE SPIRIT GIVES US LIFE FROM ABOVE

We know that Jesus was confirmed as the Son of God at his baptism when the Holy Spirit descended from heaven and remained on him. But we have a tendency to ignore a second identification pronounced by John the Baptist at the same time. John's testimony regarding Jesus as Son of God was predicated by the Spirit's confirmation of Jesus as "the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (1:33). This emphasis is also recorded in the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). John the Baptist contrasted his baptism unto repentance with the new baptism that would be inaugurated by the Son of God: a baptism with the Holy Spirit.

The necessity of this baptism is seen more clearly in Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus emphatically stated that no one would see or enter the kingdom of God without being born again—that is, born "from above" (3:3,7). The parallelism of Jesus' comments further clarify that the birth from above requires being born of the Spirit (3:5,6,8). In the gospel of John, this baptism with the Holy Spirit does not point to charismatic gifts but results in the regeneration of the believer's spirit with life from above. Being born of the Spirit allows the believer to see and enter the kingdom of God.

Although the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism permitted John the Baptist to identify Jesus as the promised Son of God, the primary function of this sign was to confirm that Jesus was indeed the one who would baptize with the Spirit. In contrast with John's baptism of repentance, Jesus offers a baptism of regeneration by the Spirit. This birth through the agency of the Spirit is the power that enables us to become children of God (1:12-13).

THE SPIRIT CONFRONTS THE WORLD ABOUT JESUS

The Holy Spirit continues to mediate the presence of Christ in the world even today. In his farewell discourse, Jesus explained that the Spirit would be given to the believers as an Advocate (14:16). The world, however, would experience the Spirit much differently, for it would reject the Spirit, just as it rejected the Son of God (14:17; cf. 3:32-34, 5:43, 6:66, 8:59, 11:53, 12:37).

The world's dual rejection of both the Son and the Spirit is understandable. Jesus testified that he did nothing and said nothing on his own but only that which was given to him by the Father (5:30, 14:10). Even his death was a fulfillment of the Father's will (5:30, 17:1-5, 18:11, 19:29-30).

The Holy Spirit, who had accompanied Jesus throughout his time on earth, was sent with the same commission. After Jesus' departure, the Spirit would take the things of Jesus and declare them to the world (16:14-15). Sent from the Father at the request of Jesus, the Spirit would testify about Jesus (15:26). A consistent message was assured because neither Jesus nor the Spirit spoke on their own but only as the Father directed (14:10, 15:15, 16:13-15).

Not everyone, however, would receive their message. The world rejected the Son who was sent by the Father and would not listen to the Spirit (14:17). Jesus explained that three evidences would be used by the Spirit to convict the world, proving it to be wrong in its basic premises about sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8).

The first incriminating evidence will be the world's own disbelief in Jesus and its professed lack of sin. The Spirit testifies that the Son of God was sent to take away the sin of the world (1:29). But those who will not believe in the Son will die in their sin (8:24). In the end, refusal to believe in Jesus will prove that the world was wrong in failing to recognize its sin (16:9).

Just as the sin-cleansing death of Jesus will prove the world wrong about its stance on sin, Jesus' resurrection and ascension is the evidence that proves the world wrong about Jesus' righteousness (16:10). When he returned to the Father, Jesus was restored to the glory that he had before the creation of the world (17:5). Although he died a criminal's death, Jesus was the righteous one sent from God. At the end of the age, the Holy Spirit will use the ascension of Jesus to prove that the world was wrong in questioning his righteousness.

The world is also mistaken in its belief that there is no judgment to which it is accountable. Although the world might reject the testimony of the Spirit, it will finally learn the truth: there is a judgment. Jesus' death on the cross was not Satan's victory but his defeat (12:31-32). And if the world continues to follow its false prince, it will know the reality of judgment because the ruler of this world has already been condemned by God (16:11).

If the world would accept the testimony of the Spirit regarding the Son of God, it would know the truth concerning its sin, Jesus' righteousness, and Satan's condemnation. But if the world continues to reject the Son of God, the Spirit will prove it wrong on each of these matters.

THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS OUR WITNESS IN THE WORLD

Jesus reassures us that God's Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, a characteristic that he shares with both the Father and the Son (3:33, 14:6, 17, 16:13). This has certain implications for our lives. Not only does the presence of the Spirit allow us to worship God in spirit and in truth (4:23-24) but it also directs our witness to the world.

We can be confident that the Spirit of Truth testifies accurately on Jesus' behalf (15:26). He guided Jesus' disciples to recall what Jesus had taught them (14:26) and helped them to understand how to apply his teachings in coming situations (16:13). The Spirit did not create new information but declared only what had already been given to Jesus by the Father and taught to the disciples (14:26, 15:15, 16:15).

By protecting the truth of the disciples' witness, the Spirit also ensures the truth of our witness in the world. We relied on gospel accounts from eyewitnesses like the apostle John as we came to believe that Jesus was the Christ and accepted life in his name (20:31). Our testimony about Jesus continues to rest on the authority of scriptures that the Spirit inspired and guarded. And as we draw from the testimony of those who listened to Jesus' teaching, the Spirit also guides us to understand how to apply them in our present day, just as He guided the early disciples (16:13).

The last narrative involving the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John indicates a close connection between the gift of the Holy Spirit and the witness of Jesus' disciples to the world. The apostle records that on the evening of the resurrection day, Jesus came to his disciples as they hid behind locked doors, afraid of those who had crucified Jesus (20:19). Some had seen the empty tomb (20:3-10). Others had heard Mary Magdalene's announcement that she had actually seen and spoken with the risen Lord (20:18). Still, Jesus' disciples hid behind locked doors, afraid of persecution.

The apostle John recalled that suddenly Jesus stood in their midst, commissioning them to leave their silent safety and go beyond the familiar walls. "As the Father has sent me," Jesus said, "so I send you" (20:21). Knowing that it was time for the Advocate to be given to them, Jesus breathed on them and said,

“Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). The importance of fulfilling their commission was underscored by Jesus’ reminder that they were now involved in a work that had the potential to bring forgiveness of sin to others (20:23).

Just as Jesus’ disciples needed the Holy Spirit in order to witness to the world, we also rely on the Spirit’s power and presence. It is God’s Spirit that continues to remind us that we too have been commissioned to carry the message about Jesus to a world in need of God’s forgiveness. And it is the Spirit who reminds that when we fail to go beyond our safe walls, the sins of others go unforgiven.

A careful look at the teaching found in the gospel of John regarding the Holy Spirit illumines a presence who was intimately involved in the ministry of Jesus. The Spirit identified Jesus as God’s Son, who in turn baptized with the Holy Spirit. Jesus specially requested that the same Spirit who dwelled with him be given to his followers when he ascended to the Father. The Holy Spirit did not testify on his own behalf but reminded Jesus’ disciples about the things the Lord taught.

There is no need to be skeptical or afraid about the worth and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is not a gift offered by a bully or a trickster but one given by God to be a cherished reminder of the presence of our Lord. The Spirit bestows new birth from above, regenerating us so we can worship God in spirit and in truth.

The Holy Spirit abides with us and in us—a gift from God in the name of His beloved Son to his beloved children.

MARY ELLEN PEREIRA

Dr. Pereira recently concluded her work as associate professor of New Testament at Puget Sound Christian College in Mountlake Terrace, Washington, and has accepted a position as associate professor of Christian Ministries at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, beginning in fall 2004.

